CHAPTER I

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THE MEDIEVAL BACKGROUND

I MUST begin these lectures with an apology. Their subject is historical. It is the attitude of religious thought in England towards social organization and economic issues in the period immediately preceding the Reformation and in the two centuries which follow it. Canon Scott Holland was at once a prophet and a theologian. The most suitable beginning for a foundation established to commemorate him would have, been either an examination of the spiritual problems concealed behind the economic mechanism of our society, or a philosophical discussion of the contribution which religion can make to their solution. Discretion compels one who is competent neither to inspire to action nor to expound a system, to refrain from meddling with these high matters. I have therefore chosen the humbler task of trying to give an account of the history of opinion during one critical period. But I do so with the consciousness that the choice is due, less to any special appropriateness on the part of the subject, than to the inability of the lecturer to attempt any other.

I would not, however, excuse the selection merely by my own incapacity to do justice to a topic of more immediate moment. Thanks largely to Canon Scott Holland, and to those who worked with him, the conception of the scope and content of Christian ethics which was generally, though not universally, accepted in the nineteenth century, is undergoing a revision; and in that revision the appeal to the experience of mankind, which is history, has played some